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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TBILISI 001823

SIPDIS

FOR ASD AMBASSADOR VERSHBOW

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF ASD VERSHBOW

Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary. During your visit to Tbilisi, Saakashvili and his team will be watching closely for clues to any adjustments in U.S. policy toward Georgia. They will be anxious to discuss developments at the MOD, to clarify the new Minister's role and to reassure us of Georgia's commitment to defense reform. The Georgians will also want to discuss Georgia's capabilities and willingness to contribute to international missions. Georgia's government is seeking reassurance from us that the United States remains committed to Georgia's territorial integrity as well as its aspirations to join trans-Atlantic institutions. Georgia's leaders are increasingly concerned about the implications for Georgia that Montenegro and Bosnia may be offered MAP at the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in December.

¶2. (C) While in Tbilisi, you will meet with President Saakashvili, Defense Minister Akhalaia and a small group of "elder statesmen" who represent the think tank community. You will also kick off the first of four Working Groups referenced under the U.S.-Georgia Partnership Charter, which was signed in January 2009, and officially launched in June in Washington, D.C. by the Deputy Secretary of State. During your meetings and the Working Group, you may wish to mention the following:

-- Reassure Georgia of the strong USG commitment to Georgia's political sovereignty, territorial integrity and economic prosperity, but note the importance of continued progress on democratic reform;

-- Urge Georgia to continue to avoid provocative actions along the Administrative Boundary Lines with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in the Black Sea and in the separatist territories; and

-- Thank Georgia for its contribution to ISAF, express continued support for Georgia's NATO aspirations, and note our commitment to making the Charter a vibrant part of the U.S.-Georgian bilateral relationship. End Summary.

NEW MINISTER OF DEFENSE, NEW PACE OF REFORM

¶3. (C) President Saakashvili has argued that he appointed Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia in order to speed the reform process that had stalled under Sikharulidze and to restore order and discipline to the armed forces, in spite of the bad press and reported human rights abuses while head of Georgia's penitentiary system. Separate sources close to Sikharulidze confirm that he was often reluctant to make decisions, despite the significant progress he made in enacting long-planned systemic reforms in personnel

management, acquisition, and establishing a professional military education program. Even those within the Defense Ministry previously skeptical of Akhalaia admit that he is unafraid to make decisions and does so after close consultations with subject matter experts within the MOD. In addition, Akhalaia has been the most active Defense Minister in terms of seeking advice from the U.S. Defense Adviser Team, ODC Chief, and DATT, then following through with it. Thus far, Akhalaia has used consultations with the Defense Advisory Team to structure the Georgian Special Forces (SOF) unit along rational lines, enact additional personnel reforms, and examine the Georgian Armed Force's General Defense Plan (GDP).

¶4. (C) Following consultations with the DATT, Akhalaia Q4. (C) Following consultations with the DATT, Akhalaia corrected several weaknesses within the GDP, established a way forward in defining the missions and organization for Georgian SOF, empowered the training and education department to enact reforms within the military education structure, and produced an intelligent way-ahead for incorporating simulations into GAF training. On his own, he created a capability within the GAF to monitor and inspect training and readiness, concluded that the Joint Staff needs additional training, offered to spend national funds to provide a full-time US adviser to work personally with him, and initiated weekly meetings with the DATT. In our view, the personnel changes he has made within the Joint Staff largely address weak areas and place talented, qualified people into jobs where the previous occupant was performing poorly. Although this good performance does not change his past reports, thus far at the Ministry of Defense, there have been no reports of misbehavior or abuse attributed to the Minister.

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ENSURING LOYALTY -- PART OF THE JOB

¶5. (C) The Minister's second mission -- ensuring the reliability of the officers and men of the GAF is of equal importance -- especially since Saakashvili has publicly blamed former Minister Sikharulidze for the Mukhrovani attempted mutiny in May 2009. On balance, we believe that, while he lacks experience, the Minister appears to be aware of his limitations, is genuinely interested in making reforms designed to make the GAF better (and by extension more capable of participating in coalition stability and security operations) and understands that the acquisition of U.S.-made lethal equipment is not a near-term possibility.

¶6. (C) In DATT's last meeting with him, Akhalaia suggested the idea of Georgia providing an additional battalion of troops to ISAF (trained and equipped by Georgian National Funds with a little bit of U.S. supervisory and guiding assistance) and a smaller platoon-size contingent to another security and stability operation elsewhere in the world. Akhalaia agreed to put this on the agenda for the Security Working Group that you will chair, and made the point that this idea is one he wants to explore during forthcoming Bilateral Defense Consultations in November. He took DATT's suggestion that a January 1, 2010 start date for training this additional battalion was too soon, and is comfortable with using the Working Group as a start point for determining the timing of the program, should the USG agree that this contribution is both warranted and wise.

THE MAN VS. THE MYTH

¶7. (C) Akhalaia's choices for deputy ministers appear to be good. The mission is well-acquainted with two of them (Vashakidze was a former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Kharshiladze is a long-time contact and likely the most intelligent official in the MOD) and the third has shown encouraging signs in the two weeks he has had the job. DATT has met Akhalaia on a number of occasions and he has been composed, thoughtful, and receptive to counsel on each

occasion. Thus far, Akhalaia is a better interlocutor with DOD personnel in Tbilisi than the Defense Minister once-removed Kezerashvili and more responsive to U.S. guidance than Akhalai's well-liked predecessor, former Ambassador to the United States Dato Sikharulidze. It is too early to make a final judgment, but the early signs are all positive.

AGENDA ITEMS FOR THE WORKING GROUP

18. (C) With the addition of a discussion on international contributions, we believe that your primary MOD counterpart at the Security Working Group (whom we suspect will be Deputy Defense Minister Vashakidze) will stick to the agenda items. That said, long-term planning is not a strength of the Georgian character so we think it likely that additional items will find their way onto the agenda. Georgian DFM Bokeria, the likely other co-chair of the working group, has already warned us that the Georgians will remind you that they lack sufficient anti-armor and air defense capabilities to provide any reasonable defense of their territory in the event of a Russian invasion. The MOD interlocutor will be prepared to provide you some details on reform progress since the Colonels Working Group, and there is some significant progress on that front. It is unclear if the new Minister has a plan to reform the perennially weak acquisition/procurement process, so we encourage you to raise this as an issue requiring further leadership attention.

TRAINING SUCCESS

19. (C) Georgian cooperation and performance related to the training of the 31st Battalion and Military Intelligence Basic Officers Course has been better than ever. The officers, NCOs, and men of the 31st battalion have embraced the concept of delegating authority to NCO leaders, are on time and prepared for training, participate actively in discussions during training, and conduct additional training, on their own, for those having difficulty. These are all new phenomenon. The Training and Education department has a thoughtful plan for the way ahead and has profited greatly from the assignment of a good officer as the head.

110. (C) There seems to be general agreement among the GAF and MOD leadership that the way forward with the Russian Federation is to be as non-provocative as possible, in hopes

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that the Russian leadership will direct their disruptive attentions elsewhere. DATT has heard this from the CHOD and senior military members.

BEYOND THE MOD: SECURITY SITUATION

111. (C) More than a year since the Georgia-Russia war, and despite the loss of UNOMIG and the OSCE military monitoring mission, the situation has stabilized on the ground. There are fewer security incidents along the administrative boundary lines, although shots and explosions still occasionally occur. The most common sources of disputes now are limitations on freedom of movement across the boundaries and individual detentions. Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) for Abkhazia and South Ossetia meet every few weeks and provide a working-level forum for the various sides to exchange information and reduce tensions further. The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), through agreements with the Georgian Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs, has extensive access to Georgian security facilities and has consistently found that the Georgians exercise restraint near the boundaries. Russia, however, remains non-compliant with the cease-fire agreements, most egregiously in its basing of thousands of troops in both regions, plans for more permanent bases and introduction of FSB Border Guard units along the boundaries. Georgia recently raised concerns within the international community with its questionable seizures on the

Black Sea of cargo vessels bound for Abkhazia, but is now seeking amicable arrangements with trade partners (notably Turkey) and says it will avoid confronting Russian vessels, which may escort such ships.

¶12. (C) Although unlikely to set off renewed confrontation, human rights concerns in both regions remain a serious problem. Russia has not yet complied with the cease-fire's call for free access of humanitarian assistance, especially into South Ossetia. Although IDP returns are ostensibly one of the main topics for the ongoing Geneva discussions on Georgia, serious consideration of the issue is unlikely.

¶13. (C) Tensions remain high in the political arena. After achieving the minor success of the IPRMs, the Geneva discussions have gotten bogged down in stickier questions that resist simple resolution. The EU, along with the UN and OSCE as co-chairs, moderates the talks; Georgia, Russia and the United States are official members, while representatives of the de facto authorities and governments-in-exile participate as individual members of other delegations. Russia, casting itself as a disinterested third party comparable to the EUMM (i.e., not a party to the conflict), seeks a non-use of force (NUF) agreement between Georgia and the two regions. Russia argues that the international community's focus should be on containing Georgian "aggression." Georgia rejects the idea of signing an agreement with its own regions and argues that Russia is the primary threat to security. Georgia focuses on specific arrangements for ensuring the NUF, such as an international executive police force.

¶14. (C) Both sides claim the EU-sponsored Tagliavini Report supports their position. Georgia is wary of the Geneva discussions, concerned lest the de facto authorities gain too much legitimacy from the process. Venezuela's recent recognition of the regions, combined with Russia and Qrecognition of the regions, combined with Russia and Nicaragua's recognition, is a major concern for Georgia. On a fundamental level, Georgia does not trust that the broader international community -- the EU, the OSCE or even the UN -- will defend its security interests, and considers the United States its one true strategic partner. U.S. participation is key to keeping Georgia at the table.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION: SAKASHVILI STILL STRONG

¶15. (C) President Saakashvili is in the second year of his second term, which ends in 2013. Public criticism of Saakashvili has grown, but he appears to have weathered the August 2008 war with Russia, the global economic downturn, and three months of protests (April to June 2009) remarkably well. The economy remains an area of serious concern for many in the country and potentially an Achilles heel for the government. The events of the last 18 months have led to falling foreign direct investment, increasing unemployment, and decreasing government revenues. The economy is predicted to contract at least four percent in 2009 and the budget deficit, despite large cuts in defense and other government spending, is hovering at 9 percent.

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¶16. (C) The Saakashvili-led United National Movement (UNM) holds a constitutional majority in Parliament, having won a decisive victory in May 2008 elections. A UNM-sponsored Greenberg, Rosner, and Quinlan poll conducted in August showed Saakashvili's approval rating at 68 percent. This and other recent polls indicate that the UNM would likely win a decisive plurality if pre-term parliamentary elections were held. Despite Saakashvili's favorable polling numbers, the ruling party faces a somewhat skeptical public looking for the GoG to make good on its promises of a new wave of democratic reform as articulated by Saakashvili last fall at the UNGA and more recently in his July speech to Parliament. While the GoG's handling of spring protests drew largely

positive marks, alleged incidents of violence against opposition figures have gone uninvestigated. Saakashvili's frequent shuffling of ministers has drawn criticism both internally and from the international community.

THE OPPOSITION WEIGHS ITS OPTIONS

¶17. (C) A discredited radical opposition and a growing sense among more moderate opposition politicians of the need to engage in political processes gives the GoG a window of opportunity to delegitimize street protests as a means for political change and create avenues for political discourse within government institutions, such as the Parliament. Former Georgian Ambassador to the UN, Irakli Alasania, has formed an Alliance with two other parties and has shown an initial willingness to engage on electoral and constitutional reform. Other more radical parties, including that of Former Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze, have rejected dialogue and will likely stage future protests. The Parliamentary opposition is led by the Christian Democratic Movement (CDM), a group that has adopted a moderate, policy-based platform. Municipal elections will take place in May 2010, and will include, for the first time, the direct election of the Tbilisi mayor. Alasania has already announced his intent to run for the post.

LOGSDON